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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [OVIP](#) [CU](#) [IS](#) [VT](#)
SUBJECT: HOLY SEE: SECRETARY OF STATE BERTONE DISCUSSES CUBA,
ISRAEL, PAPAL VISIT TO U.S.

VATICAN 00000010 001.2 OF 002

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State.

REASON: 1.4 (d)

[¶1.](#) (C) Summary. Holy See Secretary of State Bertone previewed his February trip to Cuba with Ambassador, and also discussed Israel and the Pope's spring visit to the United States. Bertone hopes to see Fidel and Raul Castro, to deliver a speech at a Cuban university, to inaugurate a monument to Pope John Paul II in Santa Clara, and to visit several dioceses to hear Cuban Catholic concerns. With the Castros, Bertone will seek the establishment of a permanent church/state commission, and wider religious freedom with visiting foreign students. He will also underline certain "important points" which he left unspecified but hinted would be similar to those of the United States. Bertone asked the US to ease restrictions on movement of people to and from Cuba. Bertone complained about lack of progress with Israel on the long-running Fundamental Agreement negotiations and on restrictive visa policies for Arab Catholic priests. He had little to say about the Pope's April visit but did suggest that Benedict XVI might give a rare press conference on the eve of the visit. End summary.

[¶2.](#) (U) Ambassador, accompanied by DCM and Special Assistant, called on the Holy See's Secretary of State (prime minister equivalent), Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, January 9 -- drawing on Cuba points provided by the Department in recent emails. Bertone was accompanied by Monsignor Nicholas Thevenin. Bertone began with some fond memories of meeting President Bush in June, then turned to current events.

Cuba

[¶3.](#) (C) Bertone will be visiting Cuba in February to commemorate the tenth anniversary of Pope John Paul II's historic Cuba visit in January 1997. Citing the Cuban Bishops Conference Christmas message (which devotes considerable attention to that anniversary), Bertone said that John Paul II had made a strong impression on Fidel Castro and the Cuban people. The precise program for his own visit remains a work in progress, according to Bertone. His first task is simply to listen to the Cuban bishops. He then hopes to meet both Fidel and Raul Castro and to deliver a major address at a university, but these proposals have yet to be approved. The cardinal is optimistic on both counts; should he be permitted to deliver the speech, he will be prudent but will "underline important points", presumably including human rights and religious freedom. Bertone thinks this will be a very important moment for his audience, especially young people.

[¶4.](#) (C) Also on the agenda for the cardinal is the inauguration of a monument to Pope John Paul II in Santa Clara -- "only a few hundred meters away from Che Guevara's mausoleum", noted

Bertone, clearly pleased at the prospect of subtly undermining Che's influence by giving Cubans a nearby alternative attraction. Bertone will also visit a number of dioceses, including Havana, Santa Clara, and Guantanamo.

15. (C) Assuming that he does meet Fidel and/or Raul, Bertone intends to ask explicitly for the establishment of a permanent church/state commission. He recalled that when he visited Cuba in 2005, it had been many years since the entire group of Cuban bishops had been able to meet collectively with Fidel Castro. Bertone asked Fidel to meet them and received a promise that it would happen; on November 16 of that year Castro made good on his promise, treating the bishops to a five-hour meeting which Bertone described as "quite open". The cardinal wants to institutionalize this relationship by means of a permanent commission. He will also use the meeting to request the liberation of political prisoners. Bertone thinks the GOC may be ready for such a gesture. (The bishops' Christmas message recalls that during John Paul II's visit the regime consented to restore Christmas to its official holiday status for the first time in 30 years.)

16. (C) Among other issues, Bertone mentioned that there are some 22,000 foreign students in Cuba, many training to become doctors. He recalled telling Fidel in 2005 "90% of these students are Catholics, please allow us to help them with their faith". Bertone said that he was then able to receive 300 of them (with the Community of Sant'Egidio) in Santiago de Cuba. He wants Cuban dioceses to be able to carry on such activities on a regular basis "to lessen the effects of regime indoctrination".

17. (C) With regard to personalities, Bertone said he had never met Raul Castro but considers it very important to speak to him directly. He complained about Caridad Diego, Cuba's chief of religious affairs, who is restricting access for missionaries. He had a favorable impression of Carlos Laje Davila, the Executive Secretary of Council of Ministers, whom he considers a good economist.

18. (C) Sanctions. Bertone asked the ambassador to press the USG

VATICAN 00000010 002.2 OF 002

to ease its non-strategic sanctions on Cuba. He stressed that everyone knows these sanctions don't hurt the government, only the people. The Holy See would consider it to be a significant helpful gesture from the United States to ease restrictions on movement of people.

Israel

19. (C) Changing the subject, Bertone briefly reviewed the Holy See's relations with Israel. There are two problems, he said. One is economic, having to do with Church property. For example, his own order -- the Salesians -- has been known for over a century for its devotion to education around the world. However, in Israel it is unable to rent out excess property to earn money to pay for schools. The second problem is with visas. Catholic priests in nine Arab countries are all under the same religious jurisdiction (i.e. the Latin Patriarch and the Custos, both resident in Jerusalem) and need to travel throughout region according to the need of the day, since many are specialists in certain areas of doctrine, administration, law, etc. But the Israelis won't grant visas. Bertone noted pointedly that he had just said much the same thing in an interview to "Famiglia Cristiana", an influential Italian Catholic magazine. As he put it, "priests aren't terrorists! why block them from doing good?" Bertone said Israeli Prime Minister Peres, during his visit to the Pope last year, had promised a resolution to these issues by the end of 2007, but nothing had materialized. Bertone said the December Fundamental Agreement plenary meeting between Israel and the Holy See had likewise produced nothing. He asked for continuing US help with these problems. The ambassador, recalling that Secretary Rice has raised this issue directly with the Israelis at least twice recently, said we would continue to be supportive.

Pope Benedict's April visit to the US

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¶10. (C) Bertone was not able to offer much information about the Pope's US visit, saying that the Vatican was still working on it and that speeches and themes were still being drafted. He did note that he and Father Lombardi (the spokesman) were trying to engineer a "no-surprises" press conference for the Pope prior to his departure for the US, to help in establishing the Pope's objectives clearly right from the start.

Comment

¶11. (C) Bertone is thought to be the most powerful Secretary of State in many years; some consider him decidedly ambitious and perhaps egotistic. He is emerging as the Holy See figure best able to articulate high-level policy; the Pope prefers to speak in theological terms, and the Foreign Minister is a cipher. Bertone's lengthy interview in the January 6 "Famiglia Cristiana" touches on many interesting topics -- including Bertone's trip to Cuba, the Pope's view of the UN, Benedict's US trip, and Holy See relations with Israel and China. While he was careful to note that both the Cuba and US visits are still being shaped, he seemed confident they would turn out as he suggested. Similarly, his pleas for US support regarding sanctions and Israel were not incidental, and we can expect such topics to turn up during the Pope's visit. The idea of a carefully-designed papal press conference is a first for this reclusive pope (who usually talks to press only informally, on the plane), but a good idea -- likely motivated by the feeling that several of Benedict's previous trips have been marred by avoidable gaffes.
SANDROLINI